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ABSTRACT

The traditional concept of evaluating college teaching involves evaluation of each autonomous instructor in each classroom on campus. This paper addresses a competing concept--the need for evaluating the contribution each instructor makes to the maintenance and improvement of all instructional programs in the department--holding that both individual and team contributions need to be considered if campus teaching is to be adequately evaluated. Common problems with campus instruction that call for collective attention of faculty include teachers with poor communication skills; little organized assistance for individuals; weak articulation between adjacent and subsequent courses; and course difficulty set to screen candidates for advanced work rather than to teach each student as much as possible. A case study illustrates the lack of feedback for instructors about their teaching skills, even when they actively seek it. The paper notes, however, the possible loss of classroom autonomy that is inherent in increasing the ethic of a community of practice that directs more evaluation of campus teaching toward collaborative problem-solving. (JM)

EVALUATION OF COLLEGE TEACHING IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE[1]

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The *traditional concept* of evaluating college teaching involves the evaluation of each individual, autonomous instructor in each classroom across the campus. This approach sees the teaching and its evaluation only as taking place in the classroom and as a single instructor's responsibility.[2]

In this paper we address a *competing concept* that focuses on evaluating the contribution each instructor makes to the maintenance and improvement of all instructional programs in the department. What instructors do directly for students in their classes is, of course, important but what instructors contribute to the integrity of all department offerings is important too. A charismatic lecturer or innovative lab-organizer or personalistic mentor may contribute little to the upgrade of weak, misdirected, frivolous and out-dated courses in the department. Both individual and team contributions need to be considered if campus teaching is to be adequately evaluated.

Collaboration across a department faculty about matters of teaching is not new, but remains peripheral. Writing about a faculty as a "community of practice"[3] has become identified with Philip Morrison and John Seely Brown and colleagues at the Institute for Research on Learning at Menlo Park. These writers (Wenger, 1991; Brown, 1997; Alpert, 1998) have noted the scarcety of campus departments where instructors work closely together to maintain and improve teaching programs.[4] Wenger said:

> Even those who speak about learning organizations, life long learning, or the information society do so mostly in terms of individual learners and information processes. The notion of communities of practice helps us break this mold (p. 7)

Standard practice in many departments on many campuses is for individual professors to offer advanced courses that reflect their own scholarly distinctions and for graduate students and instructors primarily interested in becoming research professors to teach the prerequisites. These departments are a collection of stars and lesser lights, expert and noviate iconoclasts, professors worrying not very much about department offering as a whole, seldom even talking among themselves about educational issues. A community of teaching practice, it is not.

Dan Alpert (1998)[5] has written cogently about the drain on department vigor to have the National Science Foundation and philanthropic groups finance researchers and scholars more or less

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[1] Presentation at a panel session on "Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education," AERA annual meeting, San Diego, April 17, 1998.

[2] A substantial body of research has been conducted along this line of inquiry. Most of the research has focused on methods and sources of information regarding teaching effectiveness, especially on the use of students as raters. (Kinney and Smith, 1992; Braskamp, Brandenburg & Ory, 1984; Cashin, 1988; Marsh, 1987; El-Hassan, 1995).

[3] A community of practice can be defined as "a group of professionals, informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge." (Peter & Trudy Johnson-Lenz, 1998). Communities of practice have been traced back to the European guilds, but some writers see them as old as human interactivity of any kind (Community Intelligence labs, 1998).

[4] "Learning is not only an activity, but also a vehicle for engagement with others. Learning is a social phenomenon. We all belong to communities of practice (work, school, in personal activities). It is through membership in communities of practice that we come to know--and become empowered by what we know. The social world is where work gets done, where learning takes place. Instructors encompass an ensemble of interconnected communities of practice whose boundaries do not necessarily (or usually) follow the formal boundaries of the organization" (Alpert, 1998).

[5] "In a strong department, a high priority is given to collective decisions about what needs to be done. Each member has

directly to the individual principal investigator. The same problem appears to exist in thinking of teaching as an individual responsibility rather than departmental.

Teaching brilliantly or pitifully, and collaborating well or poorly in instruction, both individuals and departments need to be taken into account in evaluating campus teaching. A system which only looks at the ongoing classroom and ignores the scrutiny and problem solving of curriculum development is an impoverished effort to evaluate college teaching.

Wheeler Loomis,[6] once head of the Physics Department on our campus, used to keep a list of faculty names in his pocket, a list of "those who contributed most to the department." His ratings of instructors might have neglected eye contact, fair grading and classroom charm; but it recognized teaching as a collective responsibility.

Let us mention some common problems with campus instruction:

1. Teachers have poor communication habits.
2. Organized assistance for individuals is almost nonexistent.
3. Articulation between adjacent and subsequent courses is weak.
4. Course difficulty is set to screen candidates for advanced work rather than to teach each student as much as possible.

The last two of these problems are not prominent in students' evaluation of instruction because students have little knowledge of the content and ongoing evolution of a discipline. And many faculty members are so specialized they do not know what is happening in other corners of the department nor in allied disciplines. Articulation and course difficulty are problems for a faculty as a whole, yet many instructors can get good ratings for teaching even while ignoring them.

All four of the problems are problems that call for collective attention of a faculty. The quality of an individual faculty member to campus teaching should be partly based on his or her contributions to the remedy of such problems.

We would like to describe a senior professor Edith was studying.[7] He recognized himself and his department chair recognized that he had picked up more than his share of student complaints. We will talk about him here in terms of the mobilization of his faculty colleagues to increase the effectiveness of teaching.

Case study. The case was George Alderman, a senior professor in Practical Sciences receiving low to moderate student ratings. George has taught in his department more than 20 years. He recently was teaching a mathematics-related course required of all students in the department.

In former years, George taught the same class each term to all who enrolled. The students gave him and the course low ratings. Then the department head divided the students among three

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her own priorities but reallocation of priorities is needed when reconsidering the mission of the department as a whole. Some members of a department make unique contributions to collegiality and shared purpose, attending to the local scene rather than to gaining national prominence as individusals. Wise institutions recognize and support emerging communities of practice." (Alpert, 1998).

[6] Loomis recognized individual professional performance but also placed great value on qualities that held the community together. The Loomis List ranked individuals in terms of individual contribution to the department. At one time, at the top of the list was a Nobel Prize winner, so placed not for intellect but for his powerful contributions to other members of the department. (Alpert, 1998).

[7] George's case is part of an internal study: "Trade-Offs: The use of student ratings results and its possible impact on instructional improvement." In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to replace the names of the departments, faculty members and department head involved in the case study.

instructors, each of whom then taught two classes, 45 students each, meeting twice a week. After one semester, one of the instructors obtained high ratings for his teaching; George and the other got low ratings. George sought help from the Division of Instructional Development. His peers chose to work together.

A semester later, only George was rated low. His ratings actually went down, partly because he called for student teamwork, and with each student grading each other's participation. One of George's students formally charged him with "capricious grading." The department head sent George a letter asking him to find a way to improve.[8] In interviews, the head spoke of need for improvement of teaching but acknowledged she was not providing faculty members with other feedback on instruction, nor creating mechanisms to support teaching. George's colleague Professor Edwards said:

> Student ratings are not measuring teaching effectiveness. I advocate use of classroom visitations by peer faculty. Not only would this increase the rate at which junior professors improve their teaching skills, but we would have more reliable feedback regarding teaching effectiveness. However, classroom observations are quite time consuming. Since teaching is not rewarded to the extent that research is, many faculty members feel that it is not in their best interest to do this.

George's department head agreed:

> We would like to use various sources such as alumni or peers to evaluate instruction in addition to current students but this is not possible. We use students because they are accessible.

George commented on the help from the instructional specialist:

> I consider her the only source of meaningful feedback that I have to improve my teaching.

In other words, there was no community of practice to help George decide how he should teach. George and his colleagues allowed that peers could be a valuable source of feedback, but they stuck to the idea that help should be person-to-person rather than collective. George's colleague, Bill Wilson, said:

> On at least four occasions I have asked a colleague to sit in my class and provide me with feedback. Sometimes the feedback from a peer is productive; sometimes it is not. My experience is that the feedback from a peer is more useful when it is provided in private (if your department does not know the information.

George's other colleague, Frank Edwards, said:

> In this department, formal mentoring program does not exist. It is quite common, however, for informal mentoring, where one faculty member helps another, to take place.

And George said:

> "The feedback from a colleague may work if several professors teach the same subject, they observe each other classes, and then they have an informal conversation. But this needs to be provided as consultation not with professors writing reports for the administration.

George's case provides an example of a department that has expressly communicated its intentions for improving teaching. But since no support is provided at the department level, George

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[8] "In general, the course, which is taught by a number of different faculty members, does not receive good ratings. Since the course is required and is mathematically oriented, ratings are not typically as high as they might be in other courses. In other courses, students might have some latitude in their response to a particular situation. More than one response might be acceptable. In an analytically oriented course, there is much less latitude. An answer is usually either right or wrong. There are fewer shades of gray" (Dr. Edwards, one of George's peers).

and other instructors were left on their own. Most of them looked for feedback. Their efforts to improve teaching did not include a discussion of the responsibility of each professor to help others improve. This was seen to be an individual responsibility of the instructor.

Classroom autonomy. Our final words are about autonomy and departmental control of teaching. We have charged departments with some neglect of teaching, leaving problems largely to individual instructors. It is important also for us to recognize cases of too much regulation of teaching by a department.

As a campus standard, instructor autonomy is a fact of life and recognized by such writers as Peters and Waterman (1984) as an important contribution to good work. Increasing the ethic of a community of practice and directing more evaluation of campus teaching to collaborative problem-solving will face opposition. It could contribute to harmful micro-management by the department head or executive committee. In many ways, our craft is outmoded. Restrained management, autonomous teaching, and communities of practice should be part of the renovation.

At Xerox, John Seely Brown[9] found unexpected ways for autonomous, greatly-reluctant photocopy repairmen to talk with each other about fixing ever-changing models of copiers. We college teachers are probably as smart as they. We should find collective ways of addressing our teaching problems. And connecting the evaluation of classroom teaching with the maintenance and repair of departmental instruction.

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[9] They are peers in the execution of 'real work'. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows. There are many communities of practice within a single company, and most people belong to more than one of them. (John Seely Brown -- as cited by Communities of Intelligence labs, 1998)

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